The Notion of "Hierarchy of Truths"

An Ecumenical Interpretation

The Church: Local and Universal

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An Ecumenical Interpretation

The Church: Local and Universal

Two Studies Commissioned and Received
by the Joint Working Group
between the Roman Catholic Church and the
World Council of Churches

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Introduction

The Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (WCC) was established in 1965. Though its main task is to foster and coordinate collaboration between the two parent bodies, the JWG has always sought to also render contributions to ongoing ecumenical reflection and dialogue. Thus, during the period between the WCC assemblies at Vancouver (1983) and Canberra (1991) the JWG commissioned and received the two study documents that follow. Both studies got their impetus during the visit of Pope John Paul II to the WCC in 1984. In a meeting between the Pope and the staff and others associated with the WCC, proposals were made for ecumenical study projects on the concept of "hierarchy of truths" (by Dr William A. Visser 't Hooft) and on "The Church — Local and Universal" (by WCC staff). The Pope responded affirmatively to both. The JWG then commissioned these studies in 1985 and received in 1990 the study documents which resulted.

The study document on *The Notion of "Hierarchy of Truths": An Ecumenical Interpretation* represents the first common ecumenical study on this subject and is meant to serve as a contribution to the methodology and orientation of ecumenical dialogue.

The bilateral dialogues between Christian World Communions and the multilateral dialogue conducted by the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC have led to remarkable agreements and convergences in recent years. Yet at the same time and not unconnected with these positive results, questions have been raised such as: Do we have to go on to seek more and more agreements on all possible points, or should we rather not concentrate more clearly on what is required and sufficient for further steps towards visible unity? In other words: On which points is a full consensus necessary, on which points is a convergence between diverse positions required, and where is a legitimate diversity possible and mutually enriching?

The notion of "hierarchy of truths" does not provide a simple answer to such questions. It is, first of all, a reminder of the fact that the different Christian traditions have, indeed, developed diverse ways of thinking, methodologies and

structures with regard to Christian doctrine. In some traditions (Reformation and Free church) we find an emphasis on a differentiation or distinction between fundamental affirmations of faith (the "centre") and the different doctrines, theological affirmations and church structures which express these fundamental affirmations. Other traditions (Roman Catholic and Orthodox) emphasize the comprehensive character of fundamental affirmations of faith, doctrine and church structure in the sense of a "fullness" in which all elements constitute an indivisible unity, a coherent apostolic tradition. These differing presuppositions underlie the difficulties expressed by the above questions. The study on the notion of "hierarchy of truths" has indicated possible points of similarity or of convergence between the different approaches and concepts with regard to the truth of the Christian faith and its doctrinal expression. It could thus assist in the necessary clarification of methodological issues which is one of the conditions for the further progress of ecumenical dialogue.

The study document on *The Church: Local and Universal* is meant to serve as a contribution to the current ecumenical study of ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology has become central in the ecumenical dialogue today. The church is the focus of consideration of many recent or current international bilateral conversations. In the multilateral dialogue, sponsored by the Commission on Faith and Order, many of the official responses of churches to the Faith and Order text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* have made clear that ecclesiology must be given further attention in the future. The Faith and Order Commission has now begun the initial stages of a major study of ecclesiology which will occupy its attention in the 1990s.

An important aspect of an ecumenical understanding of the church is a proper understanding of the meaning and relationship of its universal and local expressions. The Roman Catholic Church has more characteristically emphasized the universal expression of the church, stressing the theological, spiritual and canonical bonds which link local churches to one another and to the church of Rome. The Orthodox tradition has underlined that the understanding of the local (autocephalous, national) church always includes its universal dimension. Churches stemming from the Reformation and Free churches have characteristically emphasized the local church (congregation or national church). But convergences on this matter have taken place in recent decades. The Second Vatican Council, while underscoring the links that maintain the universal expression of the church, gave renewed focus to the fact that in the local church the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is truly present. The Orthodox churches have in recent times given new emphasis to the conciliar communion of local churches, which also comes to expression in the preparations for a Great and Holy Council. And churches of the Reformation and Free churches have begun to put more stress on the links of communion existing between local churches, highlighting also more explicitly the universal dimensions of the church. The convergence which is taking place thus underlines that both expressions of the church are essential. Ecumenical dialogue has fostered this convergence and helped the churches to share these insights together. The present study is a result of such dialogue and a contribution to its further development.

John A. Radano, Rome

Günther Gassmann, Geneva

The Church: Local and Universal

A Study Document Commissioned and Received by the Joint Working Group

PREFACE

One of the ways in which the Joint Working Group (JWG) of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches has attempted over the years to fulfill its purpose of fostering closer relations between the two, has been to sponsor the joint study of issues that are of great significance in the quest for Christian unity. The theme of "The Church: Local and Universal" is one of these challenging issues.

The JWG has given attention to this theme in the period since the sixth assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, 1983. The Central Committee of the WCC asked in 1984 that this theme be studied. The JWG meeting at Riano (Rome), September-October 1985, made plans for "The Church: Local and Universal" to be an important topic for the subsequent meeting in 1987. It asked for three papers to introduce the theme with Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox perspectives, and suggested that these include some consideration of an ecclesiology of communion and also the organization of this communion at the local and universal levels, taking account of diversity within the unity of the church and of cultures. At Bossey, April-May 1987, the JWG heard and discussed these papers which were prepared by Pierre Duprey, Günther Gassmann and Ion Bria. As the process continued, the perspectives of other scholars were solicited for continued discussion of the theme at the 1988 meeting. Contributions came from Emmanuel Lanne, OSB, Jean Tillard, OP, Margaret O'Gara, and Patrick Granfield, OSB, who had in hand, as they wrote, the three papers mentioned above, as well as the list of questions raised at the discussion at Bossey. These contributions were discussed by the JWG in Venice, April-May 1988, which decided that a consultation on the theme should be held later in 1988. Since all of the contributions for 1988 were from Catholic sources, it asked that theologians belonging to the Orthodox and the Protestant traditions be part of this consultation.

The consultation was convened in Rome, during December 1986, by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity [now the Pontifical Council for Promot-

ing Christian Unity] and the Commission on Faith and Order. Members included Nicholas Lossky, Geoffrey Wainwright, Günther Gassmann, Emmanuel Lanne, OSB, Patrick Granfield, OSB, and John A. Radano. The work of the group was facilitated by a draft text prepared beforehand by Patrick Granfield who made use of the papers previously prepared for the JWG meetings of 1987 and 1988. His text was the basis for discussion. The draft resulting was discussed by the JWG in St Prix (Paris) in February 1989. It was further revised by a small committee in September 1989, reviewed by the JWG at its meeting in Rome, January-February 1990, and received there in its present form as a study document.

The Joint Working Group does not intend this study to be an exhaustive presentation on this theme. Rather it is intended to point to some factors which may help to give support and direction to the continuing ecumenical exploration of this theme. It highlights for example the necessity of both the local and the universal expressions of the church, their interdependence, the healthy tension that exists between them, and some aspects of the ecumenical convergence seen today on these notions of the church. It also explores the ecclesiology of communion and its usefulness as a framework for discussing the relationship between the local and universal church, not only within each Christian communion, but also in terms of the ecumenical relationship between divided Christian communions. It points to different expressions of ecclesial communion and helps us to see aspects of ecumenical convergence here as well.

This study document was prepared with the conviction that the ecclesiology of communion can be a way of expressing and especially of building on the real although imperfect communion already existing between churches despite their continuing divisions.

Introduction: the church as local and universal communion

1. The church is the icon of the Trinity, and the Trinity is the interior principle of ecclesial communion. From the resurrection to the *parousia*, communion is willed by the Father, realized in the Son, and caused by the Spirit in and through a community. Every authentic Christian community shares in this communion and is part of the mystery of God unfolded in Christ and the Spirit. Thus, the eschatological reality is already present, and ecclesial communion expresses the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit". At the same time the church has an inner dynamism towards that unity that rests in the Holy Spirit. In the words of Cyprian, "the church is a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit".[1]

2. Different views of the church as local and universal are found among the various Christian communions (cf. below paras 12-24). Common perspectives on the theological understanding of the local and universal church are therefore critically important for the restoration of Christian unity and have been frequently considered in ecumenical documents.[2] There is only one church in God's plan of salvation. This one church is present and manifested in the local churches throughout the world. It is the same unique church of Jesus Christ, his body, which is, thus, present in every local church. It is also the same Spirit who, from the day of Pentecost, gathers together the faithful in the one church and in the individual local churches.

3. Any ecclesiological investigation of the local and universal church must recognize both its Christological and pneumatological dimensions which are

reflected in the holy scriptures and the early creeds. The Christological dimensions of the church are realized in and through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Thus Ignatius of Antioch could affirm that "where Jesus Christ is, there is the Church Catholic" (*To the Smyrnaens*, viii.2) and Irenaeus that "where the Church is, there is the Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is the Church" (*Adversus Haereses* III.24.1). The church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

4. This paper will explore in four sections the local and universal aspects of the one church. First, the concept of the ecclesiology of communion as a theological basis and framework for the unity of the church as universal and local; second, the local and universal communion in ecumenical perspective; third, the ecclesial elements of communion; and, fourth, the structuring of communion.

I. The ecclesiology of communion

5. More and more the concept of *koinonia*[3] or communion is seen as having great value for understanding the multiplicity of local churches in the unity of the one church. *Koinonia* refers to the source and nature of the life of the church as body of Christ, people of God, and temple of the Holy Spirit. In particular, this concept allows us to hold two dimensions of the church — its locality and universality — not as separate entities but as two integrated dimensions of one reality.

6. The theological meaning of *koinonia* is rich. Used nineteen times in the New Testament, the term *koinonia* in its primary sense means participation in the life of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. *Koinonia* is the gift of the Holy Spirit: we share in the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:14). *Koinonia* refers to a profound, personal relationship between God and humanity (Acts 2:42 and John 1:3). The Old Testament themes of inheritance and covenant convey similar ideas.[4] Israel is the inheritance of the Lord (Ex. 34:9) and a covenant exists between God and his people (Jer. 24:7). *Koinonia* rests on God's free choice to communicate himself to us: "We are called into the communion of his (God's) Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9). Through baptism believers are called into the fellowship of the Spirit. As a result we share in the passion and consolation of Christ (2 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:10), and we participate in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). For St Paul the sharing of possessions and the financial help for needy churches (*koinonia* in Rom. 15:26 and 2 Cor. 9:13) are signs of our communion in the life of God.

7. Because it is the result of our union *(koinonia)* with God, the Christian community can also be called *koinonia*. The *koinonia* or bond of union between believers and God establishes a new relationship among believers themselves. It is realized by participating in the life of the Triune God through word and sacrament. The church is *koinonia* precisely because of the fellowship that its members have in the life of the Spirit.[5] Our vertical relationship with God makes possible our horizontal unity with our fellow believers.[6] *Koinonia* is a dynamic reality that binds us together within the one body of Christ. Our communion with the Triune God and with one another develops throughout history and will never be completely realized until we are ultimately united with God in glory. According to Irenaeus, the history of salvation is a progressive introduction of humanity into communion with God (*Adversus Haereses* IV.14.2).

8. Does communion relate only to the church? Can it also extend to the world and operate in society? Communion refers primarily to the church, since communion is based on participation in the life of the Trinity. The absence of communion among churches affects the world and society, because it is a negative sign of the gospel message of unity. But growing communion among the churches presents even now a positive sign of Christian unity and an effective way to encourage common Christian witness. Division among Christians is a scandal, but the church's mission to announce the gospel to the world is strengthened as communion grows.

9. In a broader sense a notion of communion can also be related to the whole of humanity. All human beings are created in the image of God and are thus called into communion with God. Because it is God's plan of salvation to reconcile broken humanity and to bring it to fulfilment in the kingdom of God, there is a dynamic in history towards solidarity and constructive interdependence. The church is called by God to serve this movement of reconciliation and to help break down barriers which prevent that renewed community among human beings willed by God. "By her relationship with Christ, the church is a kind of sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). "The church is bold in speaking of itself as the sign of the coming unity of mankind" (*Uppsala assembly* of the WCC, sect. 1).

10. The notion of the ecclesiology of communion has been found helpful in various bilateral conversations. The Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) noted that *koinonia* is the term "that most aptly expresses the mystery underlying the various New Testament images of the church".[7] The Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission described the church as "a communion subsisting in a network of local churches".[8] According to the Nairobi report of the Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, *koinonia* "includes participation in God through Christ in the Spirit by which believers become adopted children of the same Father and members of the one body of Christ sharing in the same Spirit. And it includes deep fellowship among participants, a fellowship which is both visible and invisible, finding expression in faith and order, in prayer and sacrament, in mission and service" (para 23).[9] The first report of the Catholic-Orthodox Joint Commission, issued at Munich in 1982 and entitled: "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity", spoke of the way in which "the unfolding of the eucharistic celebration of the local church shows how the *koinonia* takes shape in the church celebrating the eucharist". It went on to describe aspects of that *koinonia*, including that "the *koinonia* is eschatological... kerygmatic... (and) at once ministerial and pneumatological".[10] The Reformed-Catholic dialogue spoke of the church indicating that "... it comes together for the purpose of adoration and prayer, to receive ever new instruction and consolation and to celebrate the presence of Christ in the sacrament; around this centre, and with the multiplicity of gifts granted by the Spirit...it lives as a *koinonia* of those who need and help each other" (*The Presence of Christ in Church and World*, 1977).[11]

11. Various Christian World Communions have also recognized the importance of the ecclesiology of communion. Within the Roman Catholic Church, for

example, Cardinal Willebrands said that "the deepening... of an ecclesiology of communion is... perhaps the greatest possibility for tomorrow's ecumenism",[12] and the 1985 Synod of Bishops called by the Pope on the twentieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council recalled that "the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents".[13] In its "Statement on the Self-Understanding and Task of the Lutheran World Federation", the seventh assembly of the LWF (1984) stated that: "We give witness and affirm the communion in which the Lutheran churches of the whole world are bound together."[14] The ecclesiology of communion was also a major consideration of the Anglican communion within the Lambeth conference in 1988.

II. Local and universal communion in ecumenical perspective

12. Any discussion of the *koinonia* in the local and universal church must be first placed in the broader context of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, the *Una Sancta* of the early Christian creeds.[15] The *Una Sancta* in the plan of God is God's creation — an eschatological reality existing throughout history from the earliest days (*ecclesia ab Abel*) to the return of Christ in glory. The local and universal church are historical manifestations of the *Una Sancta*, even though they should not be purely and simply identified with it. They have their unity in the *Una Sancta*. There is only one church of God, whether it is expressed locally or universally.

1. The local church

13. The local church is truly church. It has everything it needs to be church in its own situation: it confesses the apostolic faith (with special reference to belief in the Trinity and the Lordship of Jesus); it proclaims the word of God in scripture, baptizes its members, celebrates the eucharist and other sacraments; it affirms and responds to the presence of the Holy Spirit and his gifts, announces and looks forward to the kingdom, and recognizes the ministry of authority within the community. All these various features must exist together in order for there to be a local church within the communion of the church of God. The local church is not a free-standing, self-sufficient reality. As part of a network of communion, the local church maintains its reality as church by relating to other local churches. In the words of Vatican II, "The Church of Christ is truly present *(vere adest)* in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament" (*Lumen Gentium*, 26).[16]

14. The local church is not an administrative or juridical sub-section or part of the universal church. In the local church the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is truly present and active (*Christus Dominus*, 22). The local church is the place where the church of God becomes concretely realized. It is a gathering of believers that is seized by the Spirit of the risen Christ and becomes *koinonia* by participating in the life of God.

15. All Christian World Communions can, in general, agree with the definition of the local church as a community of baptized believers in which the word of God is preached, the apostolic faith confessed, the sacraments are celebrated, the redemptive work of Christ for the world is witnessed to, and a ministry of *episcope*

exercised by bishops or other ministers is serving the community. Differences between World Communions are connected with the role and place of the bishop in relation to the local church.

16. For churches of the "Catholic" tradition the bishop is essential for the understanding and structure of a local church. Bishops, as successors of the apostles, are "the visible principle and foundation of unity in their own particular churches" (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). According to the first report of the Catholic-Orthodox Joint Commission (Munich 1982, cf. note 10), "the bishop stands at the heart of the local church as minister of the Spirit to discern the charisms, and take care that they are exercised in harmony, for the good of all, in faithfulness to the apostolic tradition". The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission defined the local church as "the unity of local communities under one bishop" (ARCIC-I, *The Final Report, op. cit.*, p.92). Accordingly, the church is most fully revealed/realized when God's people are united at the eucharistic assembly with the bishop. Consequently, the local church in these traditions is primarily the diocese, but it may also refer to several dioceses.

17. For churches of the Reformation and Free church traditions, which have developed a great variety of institutional structures and forms of self-understanding, the term "local church" is not so common and therefore also not defined by referring to the office of the bishop. For these churches it is the local Christian community (parish, congregation) for which the above definition would apply and which could, therefore, be called a local church.

18. Yet in addition to the common elements mentioned above in paragraph 15, there are also certain convergences concerning the differences just mentioned. Within churches characterized by an "episcopal" concept of the local church, the local congregation or parish is recognized as the local expression of the diocese and the entire church (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 42). Such communities must, however, be related to the local church, i.e., diocese, and be in communion with it.[17] Reformation and Free churches, on the other hand, which put special emphasis on the local congregation, have developed structures which serve a larger community of congregations (e.g. districts, dioceses, circuits) and have developed ministries (e.g. bishops, superintendents, regional pastors) which carry special responsibilities (together with presbyteral-synodical organs) for such larger units. In the past such larger geographical structures were seen mainly under practical aspects. In the present, however, such wider expressions of a local church are seen in a number of churches also in pastoral and ecclesiological terms: as communions of communities.

2. The universal church

19. The universal church is the communion of all the local churches united in faith and worship around the world. However, the universal church is not the sum, federation or juxtaposition of the local churches, but all together are the same church of God present and acting in this world. The issue here is fundamentally ecclesiological and not organizational.[18] The communion of local churches gathered by and around the celebration of word and sacrament manifests the church of God. The concept of the universal church recognizes the diversity of cultural and social conditions. "While preserving unity in essentials", Christians have "a proper

freedom on the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4). Catholicity enters into the very concept of church and refers not simply to geographic extension but also to the manifold variety of local churches and their participation in the one *koinonia*. Each local church contributes its unique gifts for the good of the whole church.

20. The Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church understand themselves as representing the church universal. Reformation and Free churches, because they had to organize themselves on the national level, often had difficulties in grasping and experiencing the universal dimension of the church. However, through their involvement in the ecumenical movement and their experience within the Christian World Communions and the fellowship of the World Council of Churches, they have developed a stronger sense of the universal character of Christ's church which transcends their own reality as churches organized on a national or regional level. This experience and insight finds expression also in the development of Christian World Communions which, according to the WCC assembly at Uppsala (1968), provide "some real experience of universality".[19] It is the task of the ecumenical movement to lead the churches to that unity which enables them to confess and express together the universal communion of the church of Jesus Christ.

3. The question of priority

21. In the past, biblical scholars held that the term *ekklesia* was first used to designate the local church of a city or region and only later the universal church. Contemporary biblical study, however, raises questions about the earlier view of priority. It presents evidence that suggests a more complex picture of the early Christian community than that indicated by the axiom "first particular, then universal".[20]

22. One way of looking at the question of priority is by using an eschatological and pneumatological ecclesiology. This approach does not assign a priority exclusively to either the local or the universal church, but suggests a simultaneity of both. Both are essential. Thus it must be said, on the one hand, that in God's general plan of salvation the universal has an absolute priority over the local. For Christ came to gather together the dispersed children of God; at Pentecost the Spirit of God was poured out upon all flesh (cf. Acts 2:17). God created the church in the framework of universal reconciliation and unity. The Pentecostal experience and the word and grace of Christ have continual and universal relevance. The gospel of salvation is addressed to humankind as a whole without exception. In this sense the universal has priority and will keep it forever.

23. At the same time the church began and came into existence at a determined place. "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). From this place the apostles began to preach the gospel to all the nations (cf. Matt. 28:19). In the concrete historical situation of the foundation of the church, the local had priority and will keep it until the second coming of Christ, because the gospel is preached each time in a determined place; the faithful receive baptism and celebrate eucharist in this determined place, even though it is always and necessarily in communion with all the other local churches in the world. There

is no local church that is not centred on the gospel and not in communion with all other churches.[21]

24. Since Pentecost the church celebrates the eucharist as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The eucharist celebration, therefore, embraces the church both in its local and universal dimension. It thus affirms a mutual presence of all the churches in Christ and in the Spirit[22] for the salvation of the world.

III. The ecclesial elements of communion

25. The ecclesial elements required for full communion within a visibly united church — the goal of the ecumenical movement — are: communion in the fullness of the apostolic faith, in sacramental life, in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry, in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making, and in common witness and service in the world. This goal is still to be achieved, and on the way to this goal it is important to note how the notion of ecclesial communion has been interpreted by the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council, and the way in which it has been interpreted within the World Council of Churches.

1. Interpretations of ecclesial communion

26. The Second Vatican Council described two types of ecclesial communion. The *first* is full and complete ecclesial communion in which the ecclesial elements of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church are integrally present. Accordingly, the Council taught that the unique church of Christ "subsists" in the Catholic church, "... although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside her visible structure" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). This leads to the *second* type which is partial and incomplete, but nonetheless real ecclesial communion. The essential elements are present in some way in other Christian churches: the written word of God; faith in Christ and in the Trinity; baptism; the sacraments; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity; the interior gifts of the Holy Spirit; and prayer and other spiritual benefits (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3, 20-23, and *Lumen Gentium*, 15). By their nature these elements tend towards full realization of catholic unity (*Lumen Gentium*, 8, 15). Although a non-Catholic community may not have the "institutional" fullness of the ecclesial elements, this does not mean that it does not have an authentic "pneumatic" response to the presence and grace, and form a vital communion of faith, hope and charity.[23] The ecclesiology of communion offers a promising way to explain and express the incomplete but real communion that already exists between the Catholic church and the other churches. It allows us to speak of a growing communion.

27. Vatican II, in its teaching on "subsists" and the presence of ecclesial elements outside its visible boundaries, provided sound theological basis for genuine ecumenical commitment. Although it did not resolve the problems, it nevertheless with courage and consistency laid the foundation for further progress. The ecumenical bilateral and multilateral conversations since the Council have continued to examine in detail the thorny questions connected with a common profession of faith, the sacramental life, and the role of authority.

28. Elements of communion among the churches have been discussed and clarified in the World Council of Churches in the perspective of "the unity we

seek". The results of these reflections are formulated in statements of the 1961 New Delhi and 1975 Nairobi assemblies of the WCC.

29. The New Delhi statement said: "We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to the church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people."[24]

30. Taking up the report of a Faith and Order consultation in Salamanca, the Nairobi assembly stated its vision of unity in the following way: "The one church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship, each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith, and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit. As the New Delhi assembly pointed out, they are bound together because they have received the same baptism and share in the same eucharist; they recognize each other's members and ministries. They are in their common commitment to confess the gospel of Christ by proclamation and service to the world. To this end, each church aims at maintaining sustained and sustaining relationships with her sister churches, expressed in conciliar gatherings, whenever required for the fulfilment of their common calling."[25]

31. The two statements from New Delhi and Nairobi refer to ecclesial elements that are generally recognized as being indispensable for any realization of visible church unity both on the local and universal level. These include: the common confession of the apostolic faith, mutual recognition of the apostolicity and catholicity of the other churches and of each other's members, sacraments and ministries; fellowship in the eucharist, in spiritual life and in mission and service in the world; and the achievement of mutual fellowship, also in conciliar meetings and decisions. Both statements emphasize local unity but this is inter-related, especially in the Nairobi statement, with the universal dimension of unity in the form of a conciliar fellowship (or, as a Faith and Order consultation in November 1988 stated: "conciliar communion of common faith and life in the service of God's world"). The descriptions of New Delhi and Nairobi are not limited solely to the goal of visible unity. They express at the same time basic elements of the faith and life of the church, both in its local and universal dimensions.

32. It is obvious that the essential elements of communion or unity stated in these two texts of the WCC correspond to the elements mentioned earlier in this paper. The different Christian traditions believe that these elements, in different forms, are present within their traditions and that, accordingly, full ecclesial communion exists within them. Also between member churches of the WCC different degrees of communion have developed, including, for many, eucharistic hospitality, interim eucharistic sharing, altar and pulpit fellowship understood as full communion. The question then arises as to how the communion can be described between churches which are not yet able to enter into forms of eucharistic fellowship.

33. All churches which participate actively in the ecumenical movement agree that even where eucharistic fellowship and full communion are not yet achieved between churches, nevertheless forms of communion do exist. The churches are no longer living in isolation from each other. They have developed mutual understanding and respect. They pray together and share in each other's spiritual experience and theological insights. They collaborate in addressing the needs of humanity. Through bilateral and multilateral dialogues they have achieved remarkable convergences with regard to previously divisive issues of doctrine and church order. They share, in different degrees, in the basic elements of communion. It is, therefore, possible to speak of an existing real though imperfect communion among the churches — with the understanding that the degrees of expressions of such communion may vary according to the relationships between individual churches.

34. This recognition of an already existing though imperfect communion is a significant result of ecumenical efforts and a radically new element in twentieth century church history. It provides a basis for renewal, common witness and service of the churches for the sake of God's saving and reconciling activity for all humanity. And it provides a basis and encouragement for further efforts to overcome those barriers which still prevent the recognition and implementation of full communion between the churches.

2. The interdependence of local and universal in the communion of churches

35. Elements of communion at the local level correspond to and interact with their expression at the universal level, because the Holy Spirit is the same source at both levels. Different churches, however, may have different ways of manifesting the same ecclesial elements. Ecclesial communion is lived and experienced in eucharistic communion. The eucharistic synaxis celebrates both the communion with the eternal life of the Triune God and the link with all worshipping communities, as members of the one body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17).

36. "The local church is wholly church, but it is not the whole church."[26] This applies already in the case of existing World Communions, even though they may understand "local church" differently. It will continue to apply when full unity among Christians has been realized. The local church should never be seen in isolation but always in a dynamic relationship with other local churches. It has to express its faith in relation to other churches, and in so doing it manifests communion. The catholicity of the church implies an inter-relatedness and interdependence among local churches. Once a local church turns in on itself and seeks to function completely independently from other local churches, it distorts a primary aspect of its ecclesial character. The local church is not a free-standing, self-sufficient reality. As part of a network of communion, the local church maintains its reality as church by relating to other local churches.[27]

37. Mutual solicitude, support, recognition, and communication are essential qualities among local churches. Even from earliest times, the local churches felt themselves linked to one another. This *koinonia* was expressed in a variety of ways: exchange of confessions of faith; letters of communion as a kind of "ecclesiastical passport"; hospitality; reciprocal visits; mutual material help; councils; and synods.[28]

38. Inter-relatedness is now more evident among local churches of the same World Communion. The unity we seek prompts us all to find ways of restoring such *koinonia* at the local and universal levels with Christian communities, from whom we are at present divided. Ecumenism, in its local and universal expression, with its emphasis on dialogue and mutual concern, has already opened up many avenues of collaboration, spiritual and theological exchange and convergence on essential issues of faith and order.

39. At the same time, however, the growth in the *koinonia* is especially tested when, locally or universally, the churches are called upon to act together on pressing social issues. Ethical issues can become factors of division as witnessed in the ongoing discussion on abortion, birth control, divorce, and homosexuality. The old slogan that "doctrine divides, service unites" is no longer axiomatic. The impact of socio-cultural challenges and the need for common responses to them is of immense importance for the future of ecumenism.

40. Each Christian World Communion has to face specific challenges regarding universality and particularity. The Protestant churches have stressed the importance of the local church, but they face the problem of concretely manifesting universality among their own churches. Participation in the World Council of Churches has heightened the experience of universality among the member churches. In the Roman Catholic Church today dialectical tension between local authority and central authority remains a critical issue.[29]

IV. The structuring of communion

41. The very nature of the church of God, the elements of ecclesial community already discussed, and the lived experience of individual Christian communities, all form the basis on which the canonical expression of communion has to be developed. Here are meant questions of polity, order, law, authority, and constitution which all refer to the structure of the church and of communion. What has been said above about the nature of communion and its many qualities is presupposed here. The canonical dimension of communion applies to the local and universal framework of one particular tradition as well as to the already partially existing communion among different churches.

1. Canonical structures

42. Communion, as we have seen, refers to a dynamic, spiritual, objective reality which is embodied in ecclesial structures. The gift of communion from God is not an amorphous reality but an organic unity that requires a canonical form of expression. The purpose of such canonical structuring is to ensure that the local churches (and their members), in their communion with each other, can live in harmony and fidelity to "the faith which has been once and for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

43. In the Roman Catholic Church communion with the Bishop of Rome is necessary. Vatican II referred on several occasions to "hierarchical communion".[30] It taught that one becomes a member of the college of bishops through sacramental ordination and hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college. At his ordination a bishop receives the office *(munus)* of sanctifying, teaching, and governing. But these tasks can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with

the head and members of the college of bishops. Furthermore, although bishops possess the threefold *munera* through their ordination, they cannot exercise them in a particular place without a specific determination, a "canonical mission" by the Pope. The college of bishops cannot act independently of the Pope, since the collegial character of the body would be inoperative without its head.

44. Despite certain differences in the life and the practice of Orthodox churches, they believe on the basis of a common canonical tradition that episcopal ordination confers the functions of sanctifying, teaching and ruling. They have comparable practices dealing with the designation and assignment of bishops. Moreover they agree that the bishops must be in hierarchical communion with the head of the synod. In this context, canon 34 of the "apostolic canons" is an appropriate expression of the Orthodox understanding of communion.[31]

45. The Reformation and Free churches have developed their canonical structures of expressing and safeguarding communion within their churches. According to their particular heritage they employ presbyterial and synodical structures for this purpose and, in many cases integrate into them episcopal ministries under different titles, including the office of bishop. In their respective Christian World Communions these churches have also developed canonical structures which enable consultation, cooperation, and common witness, but which do not allow for decisions which are binding for the individual member churches of that communion. However, there is a general tendency to strengthen ways in which these communions can express their common faith, life and service on a universal level.

46. The ministry of the Bishop of Rome as the minister of universal unity is essential to Roman Catholicism. According to Catholic faith Peter and his successors, the Bishops of Rome, have been entrusted by God to confirm the brethren in the faith "which has been once and for all entrusted to the saints" and in the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 25, CD2). The Bishop of Rome is seen as the sign and guarantee of the communion of local churches with each other and with the church of Peter and Paul. His ministry is multiple: to protect both unity and legitimate diversity; to offer support and solicitude; to facilitate communication between churches; and to arbitrate differences.

47. The office of the papacy remains a controversial issue in ecumenism, but there are signs of better mutual understanding.[32] On the Orthodox side the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios 1, following a deliberation and resolution of his synod, and convinced that it expressed the mind of the early church, stated that the Bishop of Rome is marked out as the one who has the presidency of charity and is the first bishop in rank and honour in the whole body of the Lord.[33] The Pope can be called *primus inter pares* (first among equals), because this apostolic see has exercised a primacy of love from earliest times.[34] In bilateral dialogues, Lutherans speak of the value of the "Petrine functions"[35] and Anglicans have agreed that "a universal primacy will be needed in a reunited church and should appropriately be the primacy of the Bishop of Rome".[36] The Joint Roman Catholic-World Methodist Council Commission noted: "Discernment of the various factors in scripture and history might contribute to an agreed perception of what functions the See of Rome might properly exercise in a ministry of universal unity, by what authority, and on what conditions" (para. 40).[37] Despite these positive statements, the problems of

ius divinum (divine right), primacy of jurisdiction, infallibility and the papal teaching authority remain subjects of intense ecumenical dialogue.

2. The shape of future unity

48. If all local churches are to be united to form one *communio ecclesiarum* (communion of churches), there must be an acceptance of the basic ecclesial elements of communion: common profession of the same apostolic faith; proclamation of the word of God; mutual recognition of the sacraments, especially baptism and eucharist; and agreement on the nature and exercise of pastoral leadership. Such agreements and recognitions are necessary for the achievement of visible unity in legitimate diversity.

49. Several models of structured Christian communion have been proposed and critically analyzed within the ecumenical movement. Some of the models of comprehensive union that have been suggested include the following: organic union; corporate union; church fellowship through agreement (concord); conciliar fellowship; communion of communions; and unity in reconciled diversity.[38] Nevertheless, the precise shape the united church of the future should take and the forms of diversity it could embrace is an important but still unresolved question for all Christian communities.

50. Furthermore, the different understandings of the Christian World Communions concerning the relationship between the church local and universal clearly affects our approach towards future unity. Questions are raised if ecumenical relations develop rapidly on the local level between traditions which have not achieved full communion on the universal level. For example, what degree of communion can local churches of different traditions achieve in these cases, without breaking communion with churches of their own tradition?

51. In conclusion, it can be said that although canonical communion does not yet exist among local churches of different traditions, the churches are in communion in a profoundly spiritual way. Our churches share the common gospel in the Christian heritage. Because ecclesial communion is a fellowship inspired by the indwelling Spirit, we can say that the barriers of our divisions do not reach to heaven. Christian unity is both a gift and a task. Christians of all communities pray for the unity of all in each place and look forward to that "one visible church of God, truly universal and sent forth to the whole world so that the world may be converted to the gospel and so be saved, to the glory of God" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1).

NOTES

[1] Cyprian, *De Orat. Dom.* 23, *PL* 4:553 and cited in *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

[2] For examples see Faith and Order Paper No. 59, report of Joint Working Group on "Catholicity and Apostolicity", 133-58 and 216-17; the individual papers of the Group can be found in *One in Christ* 6 (1970), 242-483, note especially paper by E. Lanne, "The Local Church: Its Catholicity and Apostolicity", 288-313; Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity [now the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity], "Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National, and Local Levels", *SPCU Information Service* 26 (1975), 8-31, esp. Part 2; Paul VI, Address during the 1973 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, *SPCU Information Service* 21 (1973), 3-4; WCC, *In Each Place: Towards a Fellowship of Local Churches Truly United* (Geneva, WCC, 1977); and Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *Facing Unity* (Lutheran World Federation, 1985).

[3] *Koinonia* comes from *koinos*; common, the opposite of *idios*: proper, particular, private. *Koinoo* means to put together or to pool. *Koinonia*, then, refers to the action of having something in common, sharing in, participating in. It is often rendered in Latin by *communio* or *communicatio*.

For studies on *koinonia* consult P.C. Bori, *Koinonia* (Brescia, Paideia, 1972); J.M. McDermott, "The Biblical Doctrine of *Koinonia*", *Biblische Zeitschrift* 19 (1975), 64-77 and 219-33; H.J. Sieben, "Koinonia, communauté-communion", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (Paris, 1975), col. 1743-45; S. Brown, "*Koinonia* as the Basis of New Testament Ecclesiology?" *One in Christ* 12 (1976), 157-67; and J.M.R. Tillard, *Eglise d'Eglises. L'écclésiologie de communion* (Paris, Cerf, 1987).

[4] See "Héritage et alliance", in *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* (Paris, 1970).

[5] The *communio sanctorum* in the Creed may refer both to the "communion of the saints or holy people" and to "communion in holy things" — sharing the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. See S. Benko, *The Meaning of Sanctorum Communio: Studies in Historical Theology* (London, SCM, 1964) 3.

[6] John Paul II has used the terms "vertical" and "horizontal". He noted that the vertical dimension of *communio* with God is primary. If it is not deeply experienced, it can weaken the possibility of the horizontal dimension reaching its full potential. Address at the meeting of the US bishops in Los Angeles, 16 September 1987. *Origins*, 1 October 1987, Vol. 17, No. 16, 257.

[7] *The Final Report*, in Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer eds, *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (New York, Paulist Press, and Geneva, WCC, 1984), 65.

[8] *Facing Unity*, 9.

[9] *Towards a Statement on the Church: Report of the Joint Commission Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, 1982-1986*. Fourth Series. *SPCU Information Service* 62 (1986), 209.

[10] *SPCU Information Service* 49 (1982), 109.

[11] *Growth in Agreement*, 447.

[12] "The Future of Ecumenism", *One in Christ* 11 (1975), 323.

[13] Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 1985, *A Message to the People of God* and *The Final Report* (Washington, NCCB, 1986).

[14] Eugene L. Brand, *Toward a Lutheran Communion: Pulpit and Altar Fellowship*, LWF Report, 26 (Geneva) Lutheran World Federation, 1988), 9. This report shows that the ecclesiology of communion has long been a subject of discussion within the Lutheran World Federation.

[15] See Ion Bria ed., *Jesus Christ — The Life of the World. An Orthodox Contribution to the Vancouver Theme* (Geneva, WCC, 1982), 12-13.

[16] For a discussion of the theology of the local church in Vatican II see the following: P. Granfield, "The Local Church as a Center of Communication and Control", *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 35 (1980), 256-63; H. Legrand, "La réalisation de l'Eglise en un lieu", in *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie*, B. Lauret and F. Refoulé eds, Tome III, *Dogmatique* 2 (Paris, Cerf, 1983), 143-345; and J.A. Komonchak, "The Local Realization of the Church", in *The Reception of Vatican II*, G. Alberigo *et al.*, eds. (Washington, Catholic University of America, 1987), 77-90.

[17] A problem in some parts of the Catholic world is the decrease in the number of ordained ministers. As a consequence there are many parishes where the liturgy of the word is becoming more common than the eucharistic liturgy. When a priest is not available, appointed lay members and religious lead the congregation in prayers and readings and distribute the eucharist. There is great concern that the practice of infrequent eucharistic liturgies could adversely affect the doctrine that the eucharist is central to the Catholic concept of the church.

[18] In the words of J.D. Zizioulas: "There is one church, as there is one God. But the expression of this one church is the communion of the many local churches". See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 134-35.

[19] *The Uppsala Report 1968*, ed. Norman Goodall (Geneva, WCC, 1968), 17.

[20] For further discussion on this point see R.E. Brown, "The New Testament Background for the Concept of the Local Church", *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 36 (1981), 1-14, here 4.

[21] For the New Testament communities of St Paul, the church of the saints of Jerusalem was a reference for communion (cf. 2 Cor. 8-9). This local church was also the test for apostolic faith (cf. Gal. 2:1ff.).

[22] Cf. J.D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 132-33.

[23] It should be noted that the expressions "full and complete communion" and "partial and incomplete communion" are not found as such in Vatican II. They are intended to correspond to "*plena*

communio" (UR, 3) and "*quaedam communio, etsi non perfecta*" (UR, 3). Some authors prefer to speak of "full and perfect communion", an expression used by Paul VI. This expression assumes the possibility of "incomplete and imperfect communion". Obviously, the use of "perfect" and "imperfect" relates to wholeness or completeness and not to the moral qualities of holiness or goodness.

[24] Lukas Vischer ed., *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement, 1927-1963* (St Louis, Bethany Press, 1963), 144-45.

[25] David M. Paton ed., *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi, 1975. The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Nairobi, 23 November-10 December 1975 (London, SPCK, and Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 60.

[26] J.J. von Allmen, "L'Eglise locale parmi les autres Eglises locales", *Irénikon* 43 (1970), 512.

[27] See J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality", *Concilium* (American ed.), Vol. 1, 45.

[28] See L. Hertling, *Communio: Church and Papacy in Early Christianity* (Chicago, Loyola University, 1972) and B.P. Prusak, "Hospitality Extended or Denied: *Koinonia* from Jesus to Augustine", *The Jurist* 36 (1976), 89-126.

[29] On this issue see P. Granfield, *The Limits of the Papacy: Authority and Autonomy in the Church* (New York, Crossroad, 1987).

[30] *Lumen Gentium* 21 and 22; *Nota praevia*, 2 and 4; and *Christus Dominus*, 5.

[31] Canon 34: "The bishops of every region ought to know who is the first one *(protos)* among them, and to esteem him as their head, and not to do any great thing without his consent; but every one ought to manage only the affairs that belong to his own diocese and the territory subject to it. But let him (i.e., the first one) not do anything without the consent of all the other (bishops); for it is by this means that there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified through Christ in the Holy Spirit". Text in F.X. Funk, *Didascalia et constitutiones apostolorum*, 1905, 572-74.

[32] See V. von Aristi, *et al., Das Papstamt: Dienst oder Hindernis für die Oekumene?* (Regensburg, F. Pustet, 1985).

[33] Letter of Dimitrios I to Pope Paul VI on the tenth anniversary of the lifting of the anathemas, 14 December 1975, in E.J. Stormon SJ ed., *Towards the Healing of Schism, The Sees of Rome and Constantinople. Public Statements and Correspondence between the Holy See and the Ecumenical Patriarchate* 1958-1984 (New York/Mahwah, the Paulist Press, 1987), par. 331, 279-81.

[34] Ignatius to the Romans I. Also see J. Meyendorff, *et al., The Primacy of Peter in the Orthodox Church* (Leighton Buzzard, Faith Press, 1963). Also P. Duprey, "Brief Reflections on the Title 'Primus inter Pares'", *One in Christ* 10 (1974), 7-12.

[35] P.C. Empie and T.A. Murphy eds, *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V* (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1974).

[36] ARCIC, *The Final Report*, in *Growth in Agreement*, 108.

[37] *Towards a Statement on the Church*, *SPCU Information Service* 62 (1986), 211.

[38] Briefly summarized in *Facing Unity*, 8-20, with appropriate bibliographical references.

The Notion of "Hierarchy of Truths": An Ecumenical Interpretation

A Study Document Commissioned and Received by the Joint Working Group

Introduction

1. During Pope John Paul II's visit to the World Council of Churches offices in Geneva (12 June 1984), Dr Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, former WCC General Secretary, suggested a study on the "hierarchy of truths". The expression is in the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism (1964). The concept has aroused ecumenical hopes, but the expression still needs clarification of its use in the Decree and of its implications for the ecumenical dialogue. The Pope immediately favoured the suggestion.

2. The Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches commissioned two consultations on "the hierarchy of truths". The first look place at Bossey, Switzerland, September 1985. After the JWG had commented on the initial report (October 1985), the second consultation met in Rome, March 1987. The draft returned to the JWG meeting in May 1987. A small editorial group incorporated the comments from the JWG and from other consultors. The JWG again reviewed the text in April-May 1988 and in February 1989, and received this present version in January 1990 as a study document to help further reflection on the theme.

3. This study document is an ecumenical attempt to understand and interpret the intention of the Second Vatican Council in speaking of a "hierarchy of truths", and to offer some implications for ecumenical dialogue and common Christian witness. The document also relates "hierarchy of truths" to other Christian traditions, although it can do so only in an approximate way. These traditions do not normally use the expression although they appreciate the insights it contains or they may express them in different terms.

Chapter One: The conciliar statement and its contents

4. "In ecumenical dialogue, when Catholic theologians join with separated brethren in common study of the divine mysteries, they should, while standing fast by the teaching of the church, pursue the work with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. *When comparing doctrines, they should remember that there*

exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths in Catholic doctrine, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith. Thus the way will be open whereby this kind of 'fraternal emulation' will incite all to a deeper awareness and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ (cf. Eph. 3:8)" (*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 11).

5. The paragraph is in the Decree's second chapter, which deals with the practice of ecumenism in the Roman Catholic Church (nos 5-12). This practice includes the continual examination of our "own faithfulness to Christ's will for the church", and our efforts "to undertake with vigour, wherever necessary, the task of renewal and reform" (no. 4). Essential in such ecumenical practice is doctrinal dialogue which is carried out "with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility" (no. 11). Therefore, the concept of "the hierarchy of truths" relates directly to the task of ecumenical dialogue.

6. The Decree emphasizes the necessity for a clear, full and understandable explanation of Catholic doctrine (no. 11) as a presupposition to "dialogue with our brethren". Then in conversation Christian communions explain their doctrine more profoundly and express it more clearly, in order to achieve a more adequate understanding and accurate judgment about each other's teaching and life (cf. no. 9). Then in the same number 11, the Decree broadens this understanding of dialogue: it is a search together into the divine mysteries to incite "a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ". One thus has to understand the statement on a "hierarchy of truths" within this broader, never-ceasing investigatory concept of dialogue.

7. Two immediate sources for the teaching about the "hierarchy of truths" indicate its meaning. Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio (Italy) first presented the idea to the Council (November 1963). He noted that "to arrive at a fair estimate of both the unity which now exists among Christians and the divergences which still remain, it seems very important to pay close attention to the hierarchical order of revealed truths which express the mystery of Christ and those elements which make up the church". Later (October 1964), in a written modus or proposed amendment to the Decree, Cardinal Franz König (Vienna) proposed the exact phrase, "hierarchy of truths". He emphasized that the truths of faith do not add up in a quantitative way, but that there is a qualitative order among them according to their respective relation to the centre or foundation of the Christian faith (Modus 49).

8. The Decree is silent about the meaning of "the foundation of Christian faith". According to the official reason (ratio) in Modus 49 for the introduction of the phrase, the importance and the "weight" of truths differ because of their specific links with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation.

9. Thus by using the words "order" or "hierarchy" the Council intended to affirm the organic nature of faith. Truths are articulated around a centre or foundation; they are not placed side by side.

Chapter Two: "Hierarchy of truths" in Christian history

10. "Hierarchy of truths" was a new concept at the Second Vatican Council. But the phrase expresses an insight into a reality which has had different forms in the history of the church. The following serve as examples.

11. Even though the *scriptures* are divinely inspired as a whole and in all its parts, many have seen an order or "hierarchy" in so far as some biblical sections or passages bear witness more directly to the fulfilment of God's promise and revelation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in the church.

12. One sees several kinds of "hierarchies" in relation to the authority of the church *councils* and to their contents. Most Christian traditions give special priority to the seven ecumenical councils of the early church. Some see also a "hierarchy" among these seven councils, inasmuch as those which have formulated the doctrine of the mystery of Christ and of the Spirit within the communion of the Holy Trinity should as such hold a pre-eminent position in comparison with the other councils.

13. The *sacraments* could provide another example of a "hierarchy" within the same order which directly concerns the faith. Baptism (which for some includes chrismation) as incorporation into the church, and the eucharist as the centre of the life of the church, are regarded as primary, while all other sacramental acts are related to these major sacraments.

14. The mystery of Jesus Christ, particularly seen in his death and resurrection, is at the centre of the *liturgical year*. All the celebrations during the year, such as Christmas and Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost, and feasts of the saints, highlight a different aspect of the one mystery which is always fully present. Thus the various festivals of the liturgical year with their particular emphases are related in different ways *(diversus nexus)* to the centre or foundation — the mystery of Jesus Christ.

15. The churches of the Reformation observe also a kind of "hierarchy" in dealing with the truths of the Christian faith. These churches hold that the gospel of God's saving action in Jesus Christ, witnessed to normatively by holy scripture, is the supreme authority to which all Christian truths should refer. It is in relation to the gospel as the centre of the faith that these churches have summarized the truths of the faith in catechisms meant for the edification of the people of God in their faith, in new liturgical formularies and books, and in confessions of faith which are to guide the pastors in their preaching and the synods in their decisions. All this implies a "hierarchy of truths".

16. The Orthodox tradition refers to the fullness of truth, the totality of the revelation of God. The revealed divine truths constitute an indivisible unity, the coherent apostolic tradition. This holy tradition, on which the church bases its unity, represents the entire content of the divinely revealed faith. There is no distinction between principal and secondary truths, between essential and non-essential doctrines. This position does not mean that within Orthodox theological reflection and formulations, there is no room for differentiation or distinctions. Orthodox theologians suggest that the concept of "hierarchy of truths" could help to distinguish permanent and common teachings of faith, such as the declared symbols (creeds) of the seven ecumenical councils and other credal statements, from those teachings which have not been formulated and sanctioned with the authority of those councils. Here may be room for differentiation. This raises, on the other hand, the problem of the nature of the teaching authority in the church. Ecumenical discussions on "hierarchy of truths" are thus inseparable from the ways in which the church formulates authoritatively the truths and insights of its faith.

Chapter Three: Interpretation

A. Hierarchy

17. The Decree on Ecumenism uses "hierarchy of truths" as a metaphor (and places "hierarchy" between quotation marks). This indicates an order of importance (a) which implies a graded structure (b) in which the different degrees serve different functions. The Decree applies this to Christian doctrine in two ways. First, there is an order between propositional truths of doctrine and the realities which are known by means of the propositions. Propositional truths of doctrine which articulate the faith, such as the Marian dogmas, refer ultimately to the divine mystery and guide the life of the people of God. Secondly, "neither in the life nor the teaching of the whole church is everything presented on the same level. Certainly all revealed truths demand the same acceptance of faith, but according to the greater or lesser proximity that they have to the basis of the revealed mystery, they are variously placed with regard to one another and have varying connections among themselves" (Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, "Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue [1970]" IV, no. 8). Some truths lean on more principal truths and are illumined by them (cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *General Catachetical Directory* [11 April 1971], No. 43; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* [24 June 1973], no. 4).

18. Some Christian traditions, upon reflection, perceive two dimensions of a "hierarchy of truths". On the one hand, God's revelation itself exhibits an order, such as the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. On the other hand, in the continuing response of faith to revelation by God's pilgrim people, one sees an ordering of truth which has been influenced by the historical and cultural contexts of time and place. These varied responses in faith to revelation have resulted in different orderings and emphases in the doctrinal expressions of various churches in their various historical periods, and of groups and even of individuals within churches. The Second Vatican Council recognizes that in the investigation of revealed truth, East and West have used different methods and approaches in understanding and proclaiming divine things and that sometimes one tradition has come nearer than the other to an appropriate appreciation of certain aspects of a revealed mystery, or has expressed them in a clearer manner (Decree on Ecumenism, 17).

19. In the ecumenical dialogue churches may become more aware of existing hierarchies or orderings of truths in their tradition and life. Through dialogue changes can result also in the ordering of a church's own teaching, and this can facilitate *rapprochement*. The Reformation churches, for example, increasingly acknowledge the significance of the episcopal ministry in their order of truths; and the Roman Catholic Church is finding a new appreciation of the doctrine of justification by faith. These are signs of convergence.

B. Foundation

20. The Decree on Ecumenism states that "the foundation of Christian faith" determines the different ordering of doctrinal truths (no. 11). What does this term "foundation" mean? The Council's deliberations hint at the meaning by reference to the "mystery of Christ" (Pangrazio) and to the "mystery of Christ and the history of

salvation" (Modus 49). This context clearly indicates that the "foundation" refers primarily to the living and life-giving centre or foundation of the Christian faith itself, and not to any of the formulations which express it. Although many different formulas have witnessed to this centre or foundation, e.g., the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Apostles' Creed, no one formula can fully grasp or express its reality.

21. This foundation is primarily that reality on which the entire Christian faith and life rests, and by which the community of Christ's disciples is constituted as his body. It establishes the true nature of the church and sustains it on its pilgrim way. The central place where this foundation is proclaimed, confessed and celebrated is the worship of the church.

22. Any attempt to describe this foundation on a conceptual level should refer to the person and mystery of Jesus Christ, true God and true human being. He is the one who said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In the life, death and resurrection of the Son of the Father, God has come into our midst for our salvation, and the Holy Spirit has been poured out into our hearts. In the Spirit's power God has established his one church, enables its members to experience Christ in faith and to be witnesses to him, and empowers the church to reach out to all humankind until all have been gathered up in God's kingdom.

23. This foundation is normatively witnessed to by the prophets, apostles and the apostolic communities in the Old and New Testaments. In faithfulness to the original apostolic witness, it is confessed in the ecumenical creeds and handed on by the church through the ages.

C. Nexus

24. The Decree bases its affirmation of a "hierarchy of truths" on the fact that these truths have different links *(diversus nexus)* with the foundation of the Christian faith. What is "different"? How do different affirmations of truth relate in different ways to the same foundation?

25. First of all, the Council's sentence does not mean that there is only a more or less incidental relationship between these truths and the foundation, so that a merely relative character stamps them, and one can consider them optional in the life of faith. Still less does the Decree's sentence consider truths of faith as more or less necessary for salvation, or suggest degrees in our obligation to believe in all that God has revealed. When one fully responds to God's self-revelation in faith, one accepts that revelation as a whole. There is no picking and choosing of what God has revealed, because there is no picking or choosing of what revelation is — our salvation. Hence, there are no degrees in the obligation to believe all that God has revealed.

26. The difference of the link of each truth is in its wider or closer proximity to the foundation of faith. This proximity does not ask us to fit each one of these truths into a static system of ordered concepts. Rather, we are to perceive the dynamic relationship which a given truth entertains with the foundation in the communal and personal faith as it is lived by each member of the body of Christ. We are to see the importance or the proximity or the "weight" which each truth has with the foundation of faith in the existential relationship of Christians and their communities.

27. This presupposes that those truths which serve to explain and protect other more fundamental truths have only an indirect link with the foundation of faith, or at least a link which is less direct than that of other truths. This is important in the search for unity among churches, because each Christian communion establishes a more or less immediate link between this or that truth and the foundation.

Chapter Four: Ecumenical and theological implications

28. The concept of "hierarchy of truths" has implications for the relations between churches as they seek full communion with one another through such means as the ecumenical dialogue. It can help to improve mutual understanding and to provide a criterion which would help to distinguish those differences in the understanding of the truths of faith which are areas of conflict from other differences which need not be.

A. Implications for the search for full communion

29. The notion of "hierarchy of truths" acknowledges that all revealed truths are related to, and can be articulated around the "foundation" — the "mystery of Christ" through which the love of God is manifested in the Holy Spirit. All those who accept and confess this mystery and are baptized are brought into union with Christ, with each other, and with the church of every time and place. This fellowship is based upon the communion of the Holy Spirit, who distributes various kinds of spiritual gifts and ministries and binds the members together in one body which is the church. Thus the "mystery of Christ", "the centre", "the foundation", is not only that which Christians believe but also a life which they share and experience.

30. Those who accept and confess the mystery of Christ and the Holy Trinity and are baptized and thereby share in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, are challenged to manifest that fellowship in shared life, in common witness, in common confession of faith and service to humanity, in shared worship, in joint pastoral care, and in commitment to ecumenical dialogue. Such living-out the degree of communion that already exists excites desire for greater communion.

31. While the common "foundation" and baptism unite Christians with one another in the communion of the Holy Spirit, they have not yet been able in a perfect way to make this communion fully visible. This is due to human weakness and sin, to theological and doctrinal disagreements, to historical factors, and in part also to differences about the ordering of truths around the central mystery.

32. In their common acknowledgment of the "foundation", divided Christians are led to view their differences of ordering the truths around this foundation in a more positive and constructive way; for example, the place in different churches of the doctrine of justification in relation to the "foundation". They understand some differences to be instances of that legitimate diversity of expression of common truth which may always characterize the communion of the church; for example, those differences in theological reflection and devotional practice which may have arisen on account of historical and cultural factors, are not necessarily differences with regard to the foundation of the faith. The communion of a visibly united church will certainly include a diversity which is a proper expression of its catholic, apostolic faith.

33. However there are doctrinal differences which are still decisive obstacles that Christians have to overcome before they can manifest full communion in a shared sacramental and ordered life. These differences vary in importance according to their relation to the central mystery of Christ. Ecumenical dialogue is one of the principal means by which Christians can better understand the weight and importance of these differences and their relation to the "foundation" of our common faith. In such dialogue Christians can gain new perspectives on their common task to reorder priorities in faith and practice and to take appropriate steps on the way to fuller communion.

34. An appreciation of "hierarchy of truths" could mean that the ecumenical agenda will be based upon a communion in the "foundation" that already exists and will point the way to that ordering of priorities which makes possible a gradual growth into full communion.

B. Implications for ecumenical dialogue

35. If rightly used, the concept of "hierarchy of truths" can help those Roman Catholics who are responsible for teaching the faith eagerly to become more open to fuller communion in the faith of Christ, when they are "comparing doctrines" (Decree, no. 11) in ecumenical dialogue. Those of other Christian confessions also make use of such an ordering of truths, and emphasize this method especially in their ecumenical initiatives. For Protestants, the gospel has a more immediate link with the foundation than does the ministry which serves the gospel. This different link also brings about differences in what we have in common. That there is only partial communion among churches is due not only to their disagreement about certain doctrines, but also to the different links they establish between the truths and the foundation of faith. The progress made in ecumenical dialogue leads to convergences which tend to attenuate the differences which the Christian Communions have established between the links of certain truths with the foundation of faith. Several churches, by recognizing this in their involvement in bilateral and multilateral dialogues, are experiencing the beginnings of such convergences.

36. By better understanding the ways in which other Christians hold, express and live the faith, each confessional tradition is often led to a better understanding also of itself, and can begin to see its own formulations of doctrine in a broader perspective. This experience and discernment of each other is mutually enriching. The process respectfully approaches the mystery of salvation and its various formulations, with no intent to "reduce" the mystery by any or all formulations. The process is a means of more adequately assessing expressions of the truth of revelation, their interrelation, their necessity and the possible diversity of formulations. Refocusing on the "foundation", a "hierarchy of truths" may therefore be an instrument of that theological and spiritual renewal which the ecumenical movement requires.

37. The notion of "hierarchy of truths" could be helpful in the area of *mission and common witness*. Especially in secularized and highly complex societies, it is important to proclaim in word and life those foundational truths of the gospel in a way that speaks to the needs of the human spirit. The common discernment of these needs is imperative and the common use of a "hierarchy of truths" may facilitate an

ecumenical discernment of the "foundation" and thus lead to convergence in theological understanding which may clarify the content of a common witness.

38. The contemporary understanding of the missionary task has to respect and take into account the richness, complexity and diversity of cultures. The process by which the Christian faith is interpreted and welcomed in various cultures requires sensitivity to this diversity. A "hierarchy of truths" may also be a means of ensuring that the necessary expressions of the faith in various cultures do not result in any loss of its content or in a separation of Christian truths from the foundation. Both in relating content of faith and culture and in making a distinction between them, the notion of "hierarchy of truths" may play an important part.

39. The notion of "hierarchy of truths" could also be a useful principle in *theological methodology and hermeneutics*. It could provide a way for ordering theological work by acknowledging both the organic wholeness and coherence of the truths of the faith and their different places in relation to the "foundation". It is *dialogical* in spirit inasmuch as it envisages "comparing doctrines" within the specific traditions and within a broader ecumenical context. In directing primary attention to the person and mystery of Jesus Christ, "the one who is, who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:8), the concept may help theology to respect the *historical dimension* of our search for, and witness to, the truth.

40. By focusing on the "foundation" — the mystery of Christ, the notion of "hierarchy of truths" contains an orientation towards the full realization of the kingdom of God and thereby already now evokes a sense of urgency and responsibility. This can highlight the dynamic character of the Christian faith, its relevance for every time and age, and therefore serve the pilgrim churches in their task of "discerning the signs of the times" and of giving an account of their faith and hope in their concrete situations. In responding to the challenges of the present with an awareness of a "hierarchy of truths", Christians are encouraged both to draw gratefully on the wisdom of their traditions and to be creative by seeking fresh responses in the light of God's coming kingdom.

Appendix

The work on the study document *The Notion of "Hierarchy of Truths"* was organized by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Untiy and the Secretariat of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.

The following persons participated in one or several meetings at which the study document was prepared:

a) Invited by the PCPCU

Prof. Georges Bavaud
Prof. William Henn, OFM
Dom Emmanuel Lanne, OSB
Prof. René Marlé, SJ
Most Rev. Basil Meeking (secretary 1985-87)
Rev. John Mutiso-Mbinda
Mons. John Radano (secretary 1987-90)
Dr Hendrik Witte

b) Invited by Faith and Order

Very Rev. Dr Georges Dragas
Dr Günther Gassmann (secretary 1985-90)
Prof. Jan Lochman
Prof. Nicolas Lossky
Dr Mary Tanner
Fr Max Thurian

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